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AUTHOR Niles, Karen
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ABSTRACT

Using an emergent literacy perspective, a qualitative case study examined a child who struggled to become a reader. The study was based on data gathered during a 33-month tutoring intervention extending from the end of repeated first grade to mid-fourth grade. Interviews and documents were used to reconstruct the child's literacy history prior to tutoring intervention and document his development from an early emergent reader to a beginning reader. Participants in the study were "David," a European-American boy from a working class family and the researcher, a graduate student in emergent literacy. Results indicated that David's stress level, which was overwhelming when tutoring began, was lowered as tutoring progressed. Findings suggest that the most helpful practices in the beginning were: prohibiting "sounding out"; supplying words he needed; and teaching him to read "around" words he did not know. Later helpful practices were: sharing the reading with him; working on his spelling words; repeated readings; and various sound and word games played to increase phonemic awareness. (Contains eight references.) (CR)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

# FOLLOWING A STRUGGLING READER: A CASE STUDY

Karen Niles
Kent State University, Kent, Ohio



A paper presented at the 47th Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference, Scottsdale, AZ, December 1997.

ED 420 834

Description: This study used an emergent literacy perspective to follow the development of David, a young struggling reader, from an early emergent reader to a beginning reader. It is based on data gathered during a 33 month tutoring intervention extending from the end of repeated first grade (4/94) to mid-fourth grade (12/96).

Purpose: Many longitudinal studies follow children who moved smoothly into literacy (Bissex, 1980). This study follows a child who struggles to become a reader. Using interviews and documents, this study attempts to reconstruct David's literacy history prior to the tutoring intervention and then documents his development from an early emergent reader to a beginning reader.

Perspective: The constructivist perspective of emergent literacy understands reading as a developmental process rather than simply as a product of school instruction. Understandings about written language begin long before formal reading instruction (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Because new understandings are dependent on both previous knowledge and current experience, learners may reject, ignore, or distort information that is too far removed from their own understandings or daily experiences (Ferreiro, 1986; Vygotsky, 1934/1962). This has led constructivists to explore both the learning context and the task as a source of difficulties (Clay, 1987; Ferriero & Teberosky, 1982) and to pay particular attention to the intersection of development and instruction.

Participants and setting: The participants are David, a European-American boy from a working-class family and myself, a graduate student in emergent literacy. The 120 tutoring sessions occurred for one hour, once or twice a week, in the local public library and occasionally, at David's home.

Data sources: Data sources were a tutoring journal (TJ) kept throughout the study; audiotapes of the last 22 months of the study; interviews with David, his parents, and his teachers; classroom observations; writing samples and other classroom artifacts; and copies of David's school file. Assessment data included graded passages administered by the researcher; the Lindamood Auditory Conceptualization (LAC) test administered by a speech and language specialist; and standardized tests administered by the school and outside agencies.

Data analysis; This is a qualitative case study. Data was read and reread for emerging themes and then charted chronologically within three broad areas: environmental factors (home, school); intrapersonal factors (e.g. motivation, stress, engagement, confidence, enjoyment); and reading process (e.g. miscues, problems, strategies, understandings). Data was also analyzed across tutoring sessions (every 10th session). Audio-tapes were used both as a source of primary data and to triangulate the tutoring journal. Parent review and assessment data were additional sources of triangulation.

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Questions: 1) How did David construct literacy? 2) How do David's experiences compare to theoretical understandings of reading difficulty? 3) What practices scaffolded David's literacy development? 4) What are the implications of this study for classroom teachers and other practitioners.

Findings:

1) How did David construct literacy? Despite his extensive preschool literacy experiences, David had very early understandings about written language when he entered Kindergarten. His ability to distinguish between graphic representations was still inconsistent and he sometimes gave number names to letters (Reason for Referral 11/14/91). In David's upper middle-class suburb, such emergent understandings were uncommon and resulted in a battery of tests being administered in his third month of Kindergarten. Results were predictably low on standardized tests in pre-reading and math. As a result, David was changed to the AM Kindergarten class and placed in a preschool Special Education class in the afternoon. His problem was seen as a generalized learning disability and the intervention plan focused on removing distractions and assisting motor and perceptual skills. The only recommendation regarding literacy was to provide opportunities to recite the alphabet and numbers (Team Evaluation Report 11/18/91). In February, 1992, his Kindergarten teacher was still concerned about his inability to focus on paper and pencil phonics tasks and an evaluation for ADD was begun, which ended when David's physician found no problem. In April, David was retested, showed great improvement, and was exited from the program.

In first grade, David he moved in February. The new district had a skills-based program strictly tied to the basal reader. Despite Chapter 1 services, David soon found himself "hopelessly behind" and it was decided to retain him in first grade (parent interview 8/7/96). Redistricting forced him to attend yet another school for repeated first grade. After a good start, his teacher became concerned about the difficulties he was having at the primer level and David's anxiety (parent progress report, 2nd grading period). January brought another ADD evaluation, this time with a medication "trial" that was quickly withdrawn. In April, 1994 David was declared eligible for services for a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) centering around reading. Chapter 1 continued but no new services were begun. In second and third grade, David's parents refused both SLD and Chapter 1 services, believing that an uninterrupted classroom would be most beneficial to David's reading growth (parent interview, 8/7/96).

It was at just this point that I began working with David as his tutor. His stress level, when asked to read aloud, was overwhelming. He could barely get the words out, stammering and choking. When he came to a word he did not know he would try to sound it out and then guess wildly. He was humiliated by having failed first grade and informed me at our first session that he was skipping a grade in junior high to "make it up". He insisted that he read chapter books "to himself" and refused to look at "baby books" in our session (TJ 4/26/94). When I was finally able to assess David, he was below the IRI levels, but achieved a PP1 on Clay's graded reading passages. I did not assess him frequently because it was so stressful for him.

As David's stress lowered, it soon became apparent that his literacy understandings had not progressed much since he had entered Kindergarten. He was not relying on the print to read--but rather on a combination of illustrations, memory, and constructed strategies. He had learned everything he could using rote memory. He knew all the letter names and could assign

sounds to individual letters. Using his memory and the alphabet knowledge he had learned he had developed strategies to handle spelling, worksheets, tests, and his basal reader. For spelling, he memorized the letter sequence in response to the spoken word. When the teacher said "cry" he could write "c-r-y" and even change it to "c-r-i-e-s" but he could not read the word cry nor any of his other spelling words (TJ 9/27/94). For worksheets, he could recognize only a few sight words, and he used the "eeny-meeny-miney-mo" strategy (TJ 1/9/95). On multiple choice tests, he would look through the answers until he found one he thought he could read and then mark it. His mother read him the basal stories at night and he memorized whole sections of text. Additional memory based strategies included returning to an earlier occurrence of the word (he said he could "hear" our previous reading of the word when he did that) (TJ 5/18/95) and revisiting a literacy event and tracing it through in his memory until he came upon the word he wanted (TJ 3/13/95).

David could not yet use his alphabet knowledge to set parameters on unknown text. Even though he knew the sound that "t" made, he could not use that knowledge to limit the possibilities when he came to a word beginning with "t". Encountering the word "town" he did not know what to do next, explaining, "There are a *million* words it could be," Similarly, upon coming to the word "driver" he guessed, "engine, wheels, chassis, gas tank" (TJ 12/8/94).

In January, 1995, David moved up one level to PP2. I also began a program of working with sounds as suggested by a speech and language therapist. His job at first was simply to identify sounds as being the same and different, placing a different colored block each time he heard a new sound. We practiced manipulating sounds in the beginning, middle, and end of words--and finally added letters. We spent time at each session doing activities I had developed to segment, blend, and manipulate phonemes.

During this period, January through August, 1994, changes began to emerge. On the tapes, we began to laugh and talk a lot as we read, with David interjecting something after almost every sentence. In February, David came in, grabbed a book and said he wanted to "read, read, read!" (TJ 2/16/95). In April, he began to try and sound out words without his previous stress. He chose to read a wordlist and attacked the task with confidence, "Next time, I'm going to figure out ALL of the words!" (TJ 4/13/95). In May, a new category emerged in the data analysis, "independence" --"Don't help me, I'll remember it." Discussing his earlier strategies for remembering words, he explained that the difference now was, "I can just remember it (the word) when I see it," (TJ 5/18/95).

Although he and I talked about "sounding-out" a lot, David never fully sounded out anything but very short words such as "him" or "sat". For longer words, he would either begin to sound out the word and then figure it out, or else keep repeating the same syllable until I rescued him. However, I believe that his engagement in the sound properties of words, even incompletely, enabled him to enlarge his "sight" word vocabulary and supported his reading growth (Ehri, 1994).

In June, David decided he wanted to re-read a book. In previous attempts at re-readings (which were few and far between because he hated to read the same book twice) David had become more contextual and moved away from the printed text. This time, he coordinated both memory AND print. He continued to reread this book for the next five sessions until he could read it fluently. In July, his mother called excitedly to tell me that David was reading signs (parent conversation, 7/6/95). Although he showed absolutely no gain on the graded reading passages



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during this time, obviously something was happening. In August, David was able to read the PP3 passage at level 8.

When David entered third grade that September, his teacher did something she had never done in 20 years of teaching. She created a separate reading group for David and three other children and repeated the second grade basal. She worked closely with David's mother and me and consistently scaffolded David's efforts so they would result in success (classroom observation 5/29/96). David made steady progress during this year, and had an unprecedented period from August to December, 1995, where there were no "low" sessions. We began scaffolded spelling, where he gave me the sounds he heard in the word, and I left blanks for the missing sounds which we filled in together. The new strategy of trying to spell words by their sounds resulted in lower spelling grades, and David began writing the words on his sleeve. Finally, his parents convinced him that as long as he tried his best the grade didn't matter.

David's difficulties in processing letters and sounds were most noticeable in spelling. Many times he would get frustrated when he would try and retrieve a particular letter or word and get another one. His old spelling strategies would occasionally emerge:

D: Oh wait, I remember a word--"goat".
Me: Let's do "groan" first.
D: I could tell you "goat"...
Me: All right, tell me "goat".
D. Oh wait, here's a word I remember. I forgot the name of it but it goes "G-O...G-O..A..T.
Me: Read it.
D: Goat
Me: Yeah, "goat".
D: That's the word!! (audio-tape 9/7/95)

In the latter part of the year, when David's reading group left for Chapter 1, David was allowed to join the regular reading group. This was a great motivator for him. In April, 1996 David read through level 18, the first passage in the second grade group. In May, an LAC re-test showed a 27 point gain. David had moved from a Kindergarten level to a third grade level in his ability to distinguish and manipulate phonemes. That same month, he informed me, "I love reading tonight," (TJ 5/2/96). At this point, his own reading level and his instructional level at school matched for the first time.

When David entered fourth grade, he had to move from the second grade basal to fourth grade material. There were no longer different reading groups. With great difficulty he worked on chapter books, taking them home each night to read with his parents. Lengthy homework assignments sparked tantrums and frustration. In November, he tested 2.3 (Woodcock Johnson) and 2.6 (Grey's Oral Reading) on outside evaluations. In December, his IEP was re-activated and he began seeing an LD tutor for spelling and test review. Despite some discouragment, David maintained his fourth grade teacher was his favorite, "because she let everyone read the same book." (TJ 12/19/96).

2) How did David's experiences compare with theoretical understandings of reading difficulties?

A) The importance of phonemic awareness in reading development was confirmed in this study. David brought many things to the reading table: an excellent vocabulary and extensive personal knowledge; an eagerness to read; a lot of experience with books; a willingness to work hard; alphabet knowledge; superb visual literacy; and an excellent memory. What he did not bring was a



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sensitivity to the phonological properties of language. He could not (and still cannot always) identify rhyming words, picking words such as "water" and "rocks" as sounding alike (TJ 8/31/95). His alphabet knowledge had no flexibility, he was unable to blend sounds, segment sounds, or manipulate sounds. Each letter had one sound, so that "t-h-e-y" was decoded as "tuh" "huh" "eh" "yuh". After we began working with sounds, David began to "move" in literacy, developing many of the behaviors of a "transitional" reader (Strewig & Jett-Simpson, 1995).

B) At the end of the study, David still had not fully entered the alphabetic stage of reading development as denoted by the ability to sequentially decode words (Ehri 1994; Frith, 1985). He could sequentially decode only very short one-syllable words and often used phonetic cueing (Ehri, 1994) for unknown words, guessing according to the first letter.

C) David continued to show variability in his level of reading on any given day, although "low" days occurred less frequently. On a "low" day, David had trouble with fluency, missed small words, added words to the text, "forgot" words, had more difficulty matching sounds and letters, made more reversals, and got exhausted quickly by the effort of reading. In spelling, he had difficulty pulling the letters he wanted, mixed up sounds, and was much less sensitive to distinguishing individual sounds. However, as his "top" level rose, so did his "bottom" level, thus increasing the reading base that he could always count on. At the end of the study, he usually read at a second grade level, but never dropped below primer.

3) What practices scaffolded David's reading? The most helpful practices in the beginning were: prohibiting "sounding out"; supplying words he needed; and teaching him to read "around" words he did not know. Later practices were: sharing the reading with him; working on his spelling words; repeated readings; and of course, the various sound, and word games we played to increase phonemic awareness.

4) What are the implications of this study for classroom teachers and other practitioners?

A) The need to connect literacy instruction to children's developmental level is critical for continuing progress. David's reading instruction was almost constantly at his frustration level. Reading tasks assumed knowledge that he had not yet constructed, and he developed alternative strategies to try and meet classroom demands (Frith, 1985). Many of these strategies were counter-productive to his reading development (Clay, 1987).

B) Generally speaking, there was little knowledge of the emergent literacy perspective as a description or understanding of learning to read. Classroom teachers and learning specialists alike did not recognize David's problems as being literacy related, blaming a general learning disability or Attention Deficit Disorder for his non-engagement in independent seatwork tasks involving reading or phonics knowledge.

C) Classroom teachers should examine their evaluations of struggling readers, seeking to avoid a steady diet of negative feedback. David received 0's on weekly spelling tests, end of unit tests, seatwork papers, workbook pages, and report cards. Hardly a day passed without several negative evaluations. He carefully blacked out his name and grade before throwing the paper away so "nobody knows I did the stupid paper." (TJ 11/6/96).



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D) This study underlines the need for one-on-one intervention programs with struggling readers, before they have habituated failure and misconstructed reading.

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Assessment Data

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| June, 1994 | level 4 | PP1 |
| Jan., 1995 | level 5 | PP2 |
| June, 1995 | level 5 | PP2 |
| Aug., 1995 | level 8 | PP3 |
| Apr., 1996 | level 18 | 2 |
| Nov., 1996 | | 2 (Burns-Roe IRI) |
| Nov., 1996 | | 2.3 (Woodcock-Johnson) |
| Nov., 1996 | | 2.6 (Grey's Oral Reading) |

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